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Senior Health and Wellness Newsletter

Kentucky Department for Aging and Independent Living



Preventing and Treating Dry Mouth

Dry mouth doesn't have to be an inevitable part of aging. While nearly 20% of seniors experience excessive dry mouth, this is often a side effect of a medication or a symptom of a medical condition. Understanding dry mouth and what causes it is important, as it can lead to a host of dental problems.

Causes of Dry Mouth

Dry mouth is often a side effect of certain medications, including:

- Antihistamines
- Blood pressure medications
- Pain pills
- Decongestants
- Medications for overactive bladder
- Antidepressants
- Diuretics
- Muscle relaxers
- Medications for Parkinson's disease
- Medications for anxiety

Some medical conditions may also cause dry mouth. The most common of these are:

- Autoimmune disorders such as Sjogren's Syndrome, rheumatoid arthritis, and lupus
- Diabetes
- Parkinson's Disease
- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression



Dry mouth may also come from dehydration, a common issue for seniors and older adults.

Issues Associated with Dry Mouth

Saliva in our mouths helps to wash away food debris and reduce plaque. As such, dry mouth can lead to severe tooth decay and gum disease if left untreated. In fact, 30 percent of all tooth decay in older adults is caused by dry mouth, according to the Oral Cancer Foundation®.

Untreated dry mouth can also lead to other health issues, including:

- Difficulty speaking
- Fungal infections in mouth
- Hoarseness
- Sore throat
- Problems with chewing and swallowing food
- Burning sensation in mouth
- Dry nasal passages
- Difficulty wearing dentures

Treating Dry Mouth

There are many things everyone can do to treat dry mouth and improve dental health. First, your dentist or physician can prescribe medications to help increase saliva production. Through regular dental checkups, your dentist can watch for problems that may be caused by dry mouth.

In addition, here are some things you can try at home to improve saliva production:

- Use sugar free gum or mints. These products can help fight dry mouth by stimulating saliva production. Look for products that contain xylitol, which is a sugar substitute that can help prevent cavities.
- Brush and floss daily. Proper oral health hygiene prevents plaque buildup – that's the sticky layer of bacteria that promotes tooth decay and gum disease. When brushing, use a fluoride toothpaste to keep teeth strong.
- Drink plenty of water. Staying hydrated will increase saliva production and help keep you healthy. Drink water after eating, and avoid foods that stick to teeth such as raisins, crackers, candy, and pretzels.
- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist. Discuss dry mouth issues with your doctor or pharmacist and listen to their recommendations. They may suggest alternate medications that won't cause dry mouth or products that can help fend off dry mouth.

For older adults, treating dry mouth is especially important as it can lead to problems with chewing, swallowing, and dentures. If you or an older adult that you care for struggles with excessive dry mouth, contact your dentist or physician right away to discuss treatment options.



References:

<https://www.toothwisdom.org/a-z/article/dry-mouth-causes-associated-problems-and-treatment/>

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